

Richard Gilbert

My top 10 essays of all time

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Not that you asked. Yet who can resist such lists? Not me. Even if they are ridiculous. There are so many great essays, how can any reader limit himself to ten? Imagine doing that with short stories. But recently I got sucked into reading a list of others' favorites, and so I made my own. Even as I wrote it, I began to disagree with it.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Okay, it's a book, but essayistic—it functions as a long essay. Last January I wrote [a post](#) that's an appreciation of its ideas and an analysis of why I believe *A Room of One's Own* works so well in storytelling terms.

Woolf's narrative craft in what could've been dry and didactic amazes. It's a feminist classic but it transcends the category gulch because of Woolf's vision of artistic androgyny. Not to mention her judicious view of each gender's shared burden.

George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant"

Orwell's classic essay about when he killed a rouge elephant just floated up out of nowhere. Which is to say, my conscious mind was straining to come up with something here. These lists force you to decide what you like and remember but also incline you to want your list to be representative of such a protean genre. My subconscious gave me Orwell. If this is an

honestly valid ranking it's because I am deviled by his persona. See how brilliantly he works his dilemma as the White Man With the Gun.

I might have listed a later classic, **E. B. White's** "Once More to the Lake," which everyone loves. I love it up to the climax—when White senses death as his boy pulls up a wet swim suit over his cold-shrunken genitals—and there, for some reason, I become withholding. I hate myself a little for this. And I feel at the same time justified because it's *my* unfair feeling. One always feels, There's got to be something to that. Maybe there isn't. It's a great essay! Such layers of time as he revisits his boyhood lake with his son.

Eudora Welty, "The Little Store"

Why doesn't everyone go around talking about this essay? Every day, I mean. You can find it online. I first **posted on it** five years ago, trying to explain its greatness. "The Little Store" is about the world of childhood, as crystallized in a 1920s neighborhood convenience store in Jackson, Mississippi, and it's about the death of childhood because of something that happens at that store. Welty rocks, always. It is so rich in detail and so scenic that it's always surprising to realize there is only one true scene in the entire piece.

James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son"

I went **on record** on this blog three years ago saying this is the Greatest American Essay. It is, without a doubt. Partly because it deals with America's great subject, race. And partly because it's so acute in manifesting how the political is personal. And largely because it's James Baldwin, such an amazing writer.

I am running the book cover from whence the title essay springs just because on it Baldwin looks like Spike Lee.

Do the right thing and read "**Notes of a Native Son.**" Repeatedly. Especially if your prose is becoming clipped. Baldwin's is orotund. He has roundness to spare, plus he's got a colloquial kick. It's getting harder and harder in America to get kicked by a mule, but you can achieve its clarifying effect through certain experiences.

Annie Dillard, “Total Eclipse”

If Virginia Woolf is the patron saint of this blog, Annie Dillard is its muse. In “Total Eclipse,” her controlled emotionalism, an almost hysterical desire for meaning and for spiritual transcendence, breaks free. She loses it, in service to mystery.

And let’s face it, bad motel room paintings of clown faces *are* terrifying. Especially right before a total eclipse of the sun. Fetal position: fully earned. Thanks, Annie.

John McPhee, “Looking for Marvin Gardens”

I don’t care whether the foreground Monopoly game is really occurring or is a composite or is fully imaginary. As always with McPhee, there’s a lot of moving parts. But here there is uncommon clarity as well—the strength of a brilliant structural idea perfectly executed. And McPhee takes his controlled lack of emotionalism to new heights of controlled lack of emotionalism.

Talk about Scotch grit. He practically invented astringent.

A braided essay is almost always a good thing, and McPhee’s alternating between the game and its real-life location is . . . just . . . perfect. He Goes to Jail in the game, he goes to the real jail. He couldn’t fail, and he didn’t.

Jo Ann Beard, “The Fourth State of Matter”

First published by the *New Yorker* and collected in her fine linked-essay memoir *The Boys of My Youth*, “The Fourth State of Matter” is a revelation. Upon crossing its path, people who don’t read essays start yelping and demanding that friends read it. Writers who return to this braided wonder focus on her dry-eyed yet plainly heartbroken persona. The terrible event she depicts is so well handled—news that stays news. And, at the same time, it’s an element that only underscores how great this essay would be even without it.

There’s [an amazing explication](#) of this essay by Jill Christman at *Essay Daily*.

David Foster Wallace, “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again”

Published in *Harper’s* as “Shipping Out,” this mordant tale of DFW’s time aboard a luxury cruise ship became the title essay of his collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*. Hilarious, poignant, erudite, and deeply reported—“A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again” epitomizes how Wallace just reported and wrote the hell out of stuff he found in the world. He was really good at the journalistic aspect, which seemed to interest him and which he seemed to find worthy of respect, while using his essayist license to reveal himself revealing things. In this case, the dark underbelly of cruises. By portraying his own hangups and odd interactions, he universalized his own indelible experience. More news that stays news here.

Five years ago, when Wallace died, I [reflected here](#) on his fun and inspiring reportage-cum-essays. Or vice versa.

Susan Griffin, “Our Secret”

As I [wrote here](#) in a longer analysis of this essay:

Susan Griffin’s long essay, a chapter in her book *A Chorus of Stones: The Private Life of War*, is about the hidden shame and pain humans carry and their consequences. It is a meditation on the soul-destroying price of conforming to false selves that have been brutalized by others, mentally or physically or both, or by themselves in committing acts of violence and emotional cruelty. A braided essay, “Our Secret” is a hybrid of memoir, history, and journalism, and is built with these discrete strands: the Holocaust; women affected by World War II directly or indirectly in their treatment by husbands and fathers; the harsh, repressive boyhood of Heinrich Himmler, who grew up to command Nazi rocketry and became the key architect of Jewish genocide; the testimony of a man scarred by war; and Griffin’s own desperately unhappy family life and harsh, repressed girlhood. In between these chunks are short italic passages of just a few sentences on cell biology—for instance, how the shell around the nucleus of the cell allows only some substances to pass through—and on the development of guided missiles in Germany and, later, by many of the same scientists, in the United States, where nuclear warheads were added and the ICBM created.

Reading my post on Griffin reminded me of another great essay, **Jonathan Lethem**'s segmented marvel "The Beards," but I'm too locked into this list now to revise it and throw someone out. Honestly, it might be Orwell, whose essay I honor but which I don't personally love like I do "The Beards."

Lee Martin, "Never Thirteen"

Martin's great essay is in his fine 2012 collection *Such a Life*. "Never Thirteen" is about his first girlfriend and how she's teaching him to kiss as his parents prepare to move him away for good. The young couple's tender love is set against the suspicions and failures of the adults around them. Martin shows their drama unfold, while also making the occasional deft comment from his current perspective in middle age. This dual perspective—him at 13, him at 57—so enriches "Never Thirteen" by deepening its poignance and by showing exactly how our minds work, fondling moments long gone.

My top essays are listed in more or less chronological order—but also somewhat in rank order, only because an essay like "Never Thirteen," a source for me of such delight and admiration, is so recent that no one else, to my knowledge, has ratified its greatness. So I am ahead of the curve—or just quirky. And seeing someone expose his peculiar taste is a good reason to read his list.

I reviewed *Such a Life* and interviewed Martin about it [in a post](#) last May.

Lists must be in the air. As I worked on this, the other day Dinty W. Moore—concise as always!—revealed [his top five](#) books. Open Culture lists [Robert Atwan's favorite essays](#) with links to where you might be able to read them.